

HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES MANAGEMENT TEAM SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT ON OPAH STOCK CONSIDERATIONS

After consideration in 2011, the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council) decided not to reclassify opah as a management unit species (MUS) in the [Fishery Management Plan for U.S. West Coast Fisheries for Highly Migratory Species](#) (HMS FMP) as part of Amendment 2. Since that time, there has been an apparent increase in overall opah landings to the U.S. West Coast as well as a greater understanding of opah taxonomy, both of which are relevant to its potential inclusion in the HMS FMP. In September 2022, the Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) highlighted a potential management need for opah ([Agenda Item I.4.a, Supplemental HMSMT Report 1](#)) based on a review of West Coast landings. Additionally, the National Marine Fisheries Service revised National Standard 1 criteria for how to consider inclusion of species (or stocks) in an FMP.

The apparent increase in opah landings beginning around 2014 may be attributed to several factors. Based on currently available data, a large proportion of opah landings come from Hawaii permitted pelagic longline (PLL) vessels landing into California, but it is unclear if there is a similar increase in U.S. West Coast permitted vessel landings due to the need for data corrections. California Department of Fish and Wildlife is currently undertaking efforts to identify and implement these data corrections to gear codes and other errors in the historic gillnet and PLL data. These corrections will allow the HMSMT to better analyze landing patterns for opah.

Additionally, there have been changes to the taxonomy of opah in recent years that are relevant to Council managed fisheries. Opah, *Lampris guttatus*, was formerly considered to be a single, cosmopolitan species. Following the results of morphological and genetic analysis, *L. guttatus* has been split into five distinct species. Two of these (smalleye Pacific opah *L. incognitus*, and bigeye Pacific opah, *L. megalopsis*) are found in the North Pacific. Available data suggests that the smalleye Pacific opah is the dominant species within the U.S. West Coast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and west to 130° W, while the bigeye Pacific opah is dominant west of 140° W. Classification of opah as an HMS still needs additional discussion. Despite displaying movements that are consistent with other species classified as HMS, opah is not included in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea list of HMS.

The HMSMT notes that while opah (*Lampris spp.*) are included as MUS in the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council Pelagics Fishery Ecosystem Plan, there may be benefits to the inclusion of both bigeye and smalleye opah in the HMS FMP as well. A primary benefit would be that the dominant species in the U.S. West Coast EEZ (smalleye Pacific opah) would be included under the geographically relevant management plan. This action may also provide support for additional research on the biology and ecology of the species which would benefit Council management of HMS as opah is often caught in HMS FMP fisheries operations.

The HMSMT recommends that the Council initiate the process for including both smalleye and bigeye Pacific opah in the HMS FMP. Given preliminary discussions, the HMSMT finds there may be justification for inclusion as Ecosystem Component species, but will continue to evaluate

the available data and research to make a recommendation at a later time, and recommends that the Council schedule time in June to begin an HMS FMP amendment scoping agenda item.

PFMC
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